This research is for the birds—really, It Is

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The saying "The early bird catches the worm," also applies to people if they're trying to keep an eye on those birds. Lab employees Charles Hathcock and David Keller, of the Environmental Stewardship group, spend two to three early mornings a week (from spring through fall) observing and sometimes interacting with birds on Lab property. At times, those days are actually nights since they need to look for owls starting at around 2 a.m. Their most recent report on the Lab's avian visitors and residents is "Winter and Breeding Bird Surveys at Los Alamos National Laboratory: Progress Report for 2010 to 2012." It reveals that during the report's timeframe, they observed more than 5,600 birds by sound and sight, and the largest percentage (15.3) of birds they recorded were nine types of sparrows.

The tracking and reporting of birds on Lab property are required under two pieces of legislation: the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) of 1918 and the Endangered Species

Act of 1973. The report cited above concentrates on the MBTA, which covers all native birds of the region, whether or not they migrate. Of the 95 species observed during the period of the report, 92 are protected under the MBTA. While the Lab has spent many years keeping track of its wildlife, a Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Department of Energy in 2006 applies more formal procedures for the reports.

Under the Endangered Species Act, the Lab is required to protect the Mexican Spotted Owl and its habitat. In recent years, two mating pairs and three chicks have been observed, with each pair requiring approximately 2,000 acres of habitat. The Lab must also protect the habitat of the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, even though none appear to be nesting on LANL property at this time.

In an effort to protect the bird species that live within LANL site boundaries, the two wildlife biologists review nearly 1,000 projects each year to ensure they don't have negative impacts on the bird populations. "One of the things we have to consider is whether a project might produce too much noise and interfere with owls' nesting. That noise could come from creating firebreaks, jackhammers, or other activities," said Keller.

In addition to simply observing the birds, some are carefully captured and banded, and all their vital statistics are noted for USFWS records. Both Hathcock and Keller have earned the federal and state permits and certifications that allow them to safely capture the birds for banding. The Lab also maintains about 800 nesting boxes that provide cozy homes for some of the feathered visitors.

The two men saw a decrease in the number of birds observed last year that they believe was due to drought and other harsh environmental conditions. Populations are up this year, most likely due to more rain and an abundance of food.

The Lab is also readying itself to help a new endangered species on Lab property–the Jemez Mountains Salamander. "The proposed rule has already been submitted by the USFWS, and comments are being accepted through November 13. We expect that the Salamander will be added to the list of endangered species," said Hathcock, "but we already know and understand its habitat and it's way off on the west boundary of Lab property, so it shouldn't present any conflicts with current Lab activities."

To read the report cited in this article, go to http://permalink.lanl.gov/object/tr?what=info:lanl-repo/lareport/LA-UR-12-25120

To learn more about the Lab's environmental protection programs, including those for birds and other animals, go to http://www.lanl.gov/community-environment/environmental-stewardship/protection/wildlife-protection/index.php.